

ESTIMATING THE SHORT-TERM COST OF POLICE TIME SPENT DEALING WITH ALCOHOL-RELATED CRIME IN NSW. NDLERF MONOGRAPH No. 25

Donnelly, Scott, Poynton, Weatherburn, Shanahan & Hansen (2007).

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

Methodology

The authors conducted two eight-day police activity studies across a representative sample of one in five of the Local Area Commands (LACs) in NSW as well as the Vikings Unit (a unit established to proactively target street offences with a particular focus on antisocial behaviour). The timing of the surveys was structured so as to control for seasonal factors across each of the five police regions. The percentage of police officers' time that was spent dealing with alcohol-related issues was then estimated and this data was used to quantify the salary costs associated with these activities.

Key findings:

- The researchers estimated that the total salary bill associated with alcohol-related issues across the 80 NSW LACs was \$50 million per annum. This represents the combined annual salaries of 1,000 full-time constables.
- Reactive policing and the activities included in it were estimated to cost \$32 million per annum. Proactive policing activities (including RBT) accounted for \$17 million, approximately one-third of total policing activity costs in this area.
- Across NSW approximately 8% of police time was spent dealing with alcohol-related activity.
- A greater proportion of police time was spent dealing with alcohol-related activities in regional areas, during shifts that involve night-time patrols and on Friday and Saturday nights.
- Nearly 15% of all recorded alcohol-related activities involved dealing with assault incidents, of which almost half were family violence-related.
- Random breath testing (RBT) accounted for more than 14% of alcohol-related activity time.
- Undertaking paperwork associated with alcohol-related activities also accounted for almost 14% of alcohol-related activity time.
- Monitoring intoxicated persons was the next highest proportion of alcohol-activity level at almost 5%.
- Other alcohol-related activities were custody (4.4%), court matters (4%), licensing matters (3.9%), walking through licensed premises (3.6%), patrols (3.3%), theft-related incidents (2.6%), meetings (1.9%), public nuisance incidents (1.5%), murder incidents (1.4%), public events (1.2%), liquor law breaches [minors and patrons], (1.1%), malicious damage to property incidents (1%) and miscellaneous (19.1%).

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- As could be anticipated, licensing police spent the largest proportion of their time involved in alcohol-related activities (49%). This was followed by custody police (14.5%), highway patrols (10.7%), general duties officers (8.7%), crime management (7.8%), user pays activities (7.1%), strike force (6.9%), criminal investigation (6.8%), management (5.8%), and administration (5.3%).

Implications for police

Proactive and reactive alcohol-related activities are a significant cost to policing. In addition, as they pointed out, the only cost component measured by the researchers was salary costs. The total costs would be much greater when other costs such as transportation and the costs of specialised equipment (such as breath testing devices) are considered.

There are likely to be significant benefits to the adoption by police of proactive strategies to prevent alcohol-related incidents. Interestingly, this research indicates that a relatively low proportion of all proactive alcohol-related strategies are directed towards the prevention of alcohol-related problems emanating from licensed premises. The largest area of proactive alcohol-related activity involved RBT (14% of alcohol-related activity time), which is arguably not a strategy that primarily focuses on preventing problems in licensed premises. The proactive alcohol-related strategies that addressed licensed premises were licensing matters (3.9% of alcohol-related activities), walking through licensed premises (3.6%), meetings (1.9%) and public events (1.2%). In this way, only approximately 9% of alcohol-related policing activities proactively aim to reduce the harm associated with alcohol consumption on licensed premises.

There may well be benefit in policing agencies enhancing the relative proportion of proactive alcohol-related activities and of policing activities as a whole that focus on proactive approaches to reducing alcohol-related harm that is associated with licensed premises.

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